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# Business Elites and the Field of Power in France

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## Abstract

Bourdieu's construct of the *field of power* has received relatively little attention despite its novelty and theoretical potential. This paper explores the meaning and implications of the construct, and integrates it into a wider conception of the formation and functioning of elites at the highest level in society. Drawing on an extensive dataset profiling the careers of members of the French business elite, it compares and contrasts those who enter the field of power with those who fail to qualify for membership, exploring why some succeed as hyper-agents while others do not. The alliance of social origin and educational attainment, class and meritocracy, emerges as particularly compelling. The field of power is shown to be relatively variegated and fluid, connecting agents from different life worlds. Methodologically, this paper connects biographical data of top French directors with the field of power in France in a novel way, while presenting an operationalization of Bourdieu's concept of the field of power as applied to the French elite.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, elite careers, field of power, French business elites, hyper-agency, power

## Introduction

This paper considers the nature and practice of elite formation among top French directors. Elite formation as an object of study cannot be separated from the study of power, hence the primary focus of this paper is on French business leaders and the pathways taken by the most powerful amongst them into what Bourdieu (1993; 1996) terms the 'field of power' (FoP hereafter). We define this as the integrative

social domain that transcends individual fields and organizations, which functions as a metafield of contestation and struggles for dominant agents – individuals who hold a controlling position within an organizational field – from different professional backgrounds (Maclean et al., 2014). Wacquant (1993: 21) describes the FoP as a ‘configuration of power relations within which the dominants... of a society are arrayed and pitted against one another’. The study of power is fundamental to the social sciences, and to organization studies in particular (Clegg, 1989a; Clegg et al., 2006; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson and Golsorkhi, 2009; Reed, 2012; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). Access to power (or lack of it) sets limits to organizational strategy as well as to individual career paths; while the outcome of power struggles at the societal level help to determine government policies, resource flows and the trajectories of social movements (Fligstein, 1997). This paper contributes to research on this important topic.

Mills’ (1956) seminal study of the power elite was centred on the US, and other eminent scholars have followed in his footsteps in examining the American super elite (e.g. Davis, 2009; Domhoff, 2006; 2009; Lindsay, 2008; Mills, 1956; Useem, 1979; Useem and Karabel, 1986). The identification of board interlocks regularly assumes centre stage (Brass et al., 2004; Burris, 2005; Burt, 1980; Davis and Greve, 1997; Mizruchi, 1996; Mizruchi and Stearns, 1988; Palmer, 1983; Palmer et al., 1986). Interlocking directorships, however, as Zald and Lounsbury (2010: 967) point out, represent only one aspect of the study of the elite occupants of ‘institutional and societal command posts’. This paper is intended as a response to the call for more research on hyper-agency and on the nature and functioning of the field of power (Schervish, 2003). The empirical domain is contemporary France, but

our conceptualization of the FoP has, we believe, wider implications. We focus on the social origins, careers and networking strategies of the French business elite, those serving as a full member of the board or executive board of at least one of France's top 100 largest companies, differentiating between those whose careers are made within the corporate world and the minority of hyper-agents who assume a more pivotal role in wider society.

Careers are the products of both institutional structures and individual agency (Inkson, 2007). They illuminate the 'structuring social context' (Goffman, 1963: 18) where societal history meets individual life stories, combining micro and macro perspectives and casting light on linkages with wider society (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). Human activity is recursive and self-reproducing, resulting in the relative imperviousness of social structures to social change; yet to be an agent is also to have the capacity for action, 'to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events' (Giddens, 1984: 14). We identify 386 of the 1,160 individuals studied, near exactly a third, as hyper-agents: that is to say that they emerge as multi-positional actors within the FoP who regularly make common cause with others in issue-based coalitions formed to secure favourable legislative and resourcing decisions, or to conceive alternative possibilities in the struggles of the moment (Bourdieu, 1996; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). We deem them 'multi-positional' because the most powerful amongst them populate boardrooms drawn from different life worlds, including public bodies, business associations, top cultural and sports organizations and charities. Hyper-agency is linked to the dynamics of power, since agents occupying 'strategic command posts' (Mills, 1956: 4) in society tend to act in such a way as to further their personal and organizational interests and

in this way to legitimate desired outcomes (Brown, 1994; 1998; Clegg et al., 2006; Fligstein, 1997; Schervish, 2003; Suchman, 1995; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010).

### **The Concept of Power**

‘Power’, according to Giddens (1981: 28-9), ‘is an integral element of all social life... All social interaction involves the use of power, as a necessary implication of the logical connection between human action and *transformative capacity*’. It is a *relational* concept (Clegg et al., 2006; Foucault, 1980). As such it is central to the study of power and politics in organizations and to contemporary organizational theory (Clegg, 1989a; 1989b; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson and Golsorkhi, 2009; Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Hickson et al., 1971; Hindess, 1982; Pfeffer, 1992). Weber (1978) in particular recognized that through the process of rationalization bound up with organization, individuals risked becoming trapped in an ‘iron cage’ of bureaucracy, restricting their power and room to manoeuvre (Courpasson and Clegg, 2006).

Building on Weber’s insights, Dahl (1961), who investigated community politics in New Haven, argued that democratic decisions were ultimately the outcome of contestation among a plurality of elites. Bachrach and Baratz (1962), however, asserted that the study of power should include examination of a second, concealed ‘face’ of power, embracing non-decision-making and institutional bias (Haugaard, 2002). Lukes (1974/2005) stated that power had to be thought about more widely still, as three-dimensional, to include control over the political agenda, being at its most efficacious when least apprehensible. In this, his views resonate with those of Foucault (1980), who demonstrates that power works most effectively

when it is least visible, being exercised through social micro-practices rather than through the deliberate intentions of autonomous agents (Lukes, 1974/2005; Oakes et al., 1998).

Concerned with the practices and mechanisms of domination which abound in human living, Foucault confirms that there is no escape from power, which is ubiquitous, decentred and polymorphous. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), he explores its disguise through seemingly neutral institutions whose control mechanisms are internalized by the individuals they seek to dominate, inducing conformity to social norms. Bourdieu (1991: 167) likewise conceives of power as perpetuated by institutions whose ‘structured and structuring’ symbolic systems bring ‘their own distinctive power to bear on the relations of power which underlie them...contributing, in Weber’s terms, to the “domestication of the dominated”’.

For many scholars, including Bourdieu, Foucault and Clegg, the relational embeddedness of power implies that it is mistaken to think in terms of cause and effect. For Clegg (1989b: 99), power is at once a ‘property of relations’ and a ““capacity” premised on resource control’. Elsewhere, we have defined power as ‘command over resources’ (Maclean et al., 2006). In the present paper, we broaden this definition to include as a vital resource the capacity of elite occupants of command posts to bring together diverse groups of high-status social actors to make common cause within the FoP. Clegg et al. (2006: 31-2), in their excellent study of power in organizations, accord particular focus to what is implied by the terms ‘power to’ and ‘power over’. Quack (2013: 661-2) defines as ‘expertise as a practical capacity’ and ‘expertise as an instrument of domination’ respectively. What we are essentially dealing with here, however, is arguably ‘power with’, which concerns the

power to mobilize in that it encompasses ‘the transformative potential of collective action’ (Quack, 2013: 661), which in turn feeds into ‘power to’. Lindsay (2008: 62) describes this as a form of ‘convening power’, stating that the power to convene is the significant ‘structural advantage’ elite actors can exploit. Leading elites use this form of convening power to help them define reality, employing their social skills strategically to fashion and ultimately determine institutional arrangements (Fligstein, 1997). However, it is important to note as a caveat that they need to keep this particular type of power active, safeguarding their legitimate right to convene power by retaining place as an active agent within the FoP (Courpasson and Golsorkhi, 2009).

This relational, dynamic aspect of power is therefore fundamental to success in the FoP, as members of the business elite assemble various resources and channels to exert influence on their way into the FoP. The world Bourdieu (1986) depicts, however, is material as well as relational. In addition to this dynamic aspect of power, power also derives from material wealth and position, as elite agents draw on their different capitals (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) to enhance their positioning in the social structure (Anheier et al., 1995).

### **The Field of Power**

Bourdieu’s work has attracted much interest from organizational theorists (e.g. Anheier et al. 1995; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Harvey et al., 2011; Mutch 2003; Kerr and Robinson, 2012; Oakes et al., 1998). Yet his concept of the FoP remains under-explored relative to his more popularized concepts of field, capital and habitus, in spite of its theoretical and empirical potential (Bourdieu, 1996). In Figure

1, we introduce our conceptualization of the FoP which, as part of our original contribution, seeks to explicate and develop the ideas and terminology first put forward by Bourdieu (1993; 1996; 2011). This depicts society as divided vertically into fields, each defined by the legitimate activities conducted within a particular social space delineated by prevailing rules of competition, practices and actor dispositions. As individual agents undergo career progression, they may gradually ascend the hierarchy within their chosen field; eventually, should they continue to progress, penetrating the *field elite*. This conceptualization of the FoP is intended to be more generic than the French context alone, with wider implications, being designed to explicate and operationalize elite formation in the West more generally.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

In Figure 1, we show various pathways to the top which might be followed within individual fields, including those of health, education, public administration, politics, the cultural and legal fields, as well as the organizational field. In the French context, Bourdieu's writing on the FoP refers specifically to the business elite closely intersected with those who serve the State. In this regard, our empirical study, as a comprehensive survey of all directors of the top 100 companies, classified by type, covers only one facet of the FoP, albeit a very important one, focusing namely on entrance achieved through membership of the business elite (including those who began their careers in public administration and professions and then moved into the business arena). In the interests of clarity, it is worth pointing out that our study does not cover those who made their way into the FoP exclusively through the administrative pathway (which is not uncommon in France), nor those who might have made it exclusively through a professional pathway or from other fields.



The concept of the *power elite*, informed by the seminal studies of Mills (1956) and Useem (1984), refers to a network of dominant agents operating collectively within the FoP above individual field level and within the topmost strata transcending distinctive organizational fields. This depiction of the power elite in Figure 1 as horizontal, boundary spanning, effectively sitting above and buttressed by individual field elites, shifts the emphasis away from the ‘vertical differentiation of perceived power’ (Hickson et al., 1971: 217) to the inter-organizational; the social space where different types of dominant agent engage as equals with their peers from different life worlds to form *power elite coalitions* in pursuit of specific economic, social and political objectives. These coalitions, as Figure 1 implies, are not ‘hard-wired’, but, as the dotted lines suggest, may form and disband in response to pressing issues of the day. Elevation or *ascension* to the level of field elite represents a *sine qua non* for the potential entry of an agent into the FoP; boardrooms in particular representing the ultimate loci of power in organizational settings (Pettigrew and McNulty, 1998). *Accession* to the field of power, however, is an arduous process which cannot be taken for granted; membership of what Mills (1956: 281) dubs the ‘fraternity of the successful’ depending crucially on subsequent engagement with other dominant agents within broader societal networks (Maclean et al., 2010).

The careers of elite actors in the field of power regularly transcend organizational boundaries (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Geletkanycz and Hambrick, 1997; O’Mahony and Bechky, 2006), connecting contests within the organization with broader power struggles in society-at-large. To transcend their particular organizational field, dominant agents must achieve voice beyond the confines of

their respective organization and field. Individual organizational fields may be viewed as sites of contestation, playgrounds or battlefields, where agents or institutions are defined as dominant or subordinate according to their positioning within the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Iellatchitch et al., 2003; Rosenbaum, 1984). The FoP, conversely, functions as a 'macro-level arena of struggle' (Swartz 2008: 50), affording access to substantial volumes of capital (economic, social and symbolic in particular) to the most dominant agents (Anheier et al., 1995; Harvey and Maclean, 2008). It both sets elite agents from different fields (such as health, public administration, politics, intelligentsia, art and culture, law or the media) against one another; while at the same time providing the necessary structural conditions for them to collaborate through forming time-limited, issue-based coalitions of interests (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008). Players cannot rely on their various capitals alone, nor solely on the hand that they have been dealt in life; playing the game skilfully being instrumental to eventual success (Fligstein, 1997).

Through alliances and networks forged within the FoP, elite agents seek to influence societal decision-making processes, resource flows, opinion formation and wider logics of action by strengthening commitment to particular projects or objectives. They 'make accounts', as Giddens (1984: 29) puts it, becoming the purveyors of legitimizing narratives or scripts designed to inform collective systems of meaning in order to effect or impede institutional change (Creed et al., 2002; Lindsay, 2008; Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Mills, 1940; Scott, 2001; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Vaara, 2002). Fligstein (1997) explains how they exploit their social skills in order to direct authority and frame action. It is crucial, however, that their actions are legitimized by wider public perceptions of their civic-mindedness and

disinterestedness (Bourdieu 1996: 389; Harvey et al., 2011), since, as Fligstein (1997: 400) argues, 'If others think that one wants something and that it is narrowly for selfish purposes, then they are unlikely to try to negotiate'. Through playing the game with skill, elite agents are able to influence their own positioning within the "supra-individual" structuration of social institutions' (Giddens, 1984: xxv). In asserting their 'right' to discourse in a Foucauldian sense (Bourdieu, 1987; Domhoff, 2009; White, 1979), the most powerful amongst them 'struggle to impose their particular capital... as the most legitimate for dominating an entire social order' (Swartz, 2008: 50); eventually forcing action through legislative or quasi-legislative means. In this way, through hyper-agency, they seek to counter such countervailing power and resistance to their agendas as might arise in order to pursue their interests, personal and organizational.

## **Methodology**

Our methodology is prosopographical. We gathered data on the social origins, education, careers, networks, affiliations, distinctions and interests of the executive and non-executive directors of the top 100 companies in France (with the exception of employee representatives who lack power for the reason that, while they are entitled to attend board meetings, they are not permitted to speak and therefore effectively have no voice) in post for part or all of the period 1998-2004, since 'sampling large firms best represents the population to which the sociology of the corporate elite is most applicable' (Davis et al., 2003: 314). Composition of the top 100 French companies was determined by size by computing an equally weighted composite measure based on total capital employed, turnover, profit-before-tax,

and employment (Grant, 1997); market capitalization having been rejected as a selection criterion because of its susceptibility to short-term fluctuations.

To profile individual members of the elite, data were gathered from five main sources: company annual reports and accounts; *Le Guide des Etats Majors des grandes entreprises* for 1999 to 2004; *Who's Who in France* for 2004 and its online version, which furnished on data social origins, education, careers, interests, honours and distinctions; extensive web searches, including standard business sources for director information such as company websites, *Business Week*, *Forbes* and the *Financial Times*; newspaper and periodical articles sourced using the Highbeam research service. The project database was built through the addition of data on a case-by-case basis using multiple tables in an integrated relational structure. We ran consistency routines for data recorded in the database, and then populated fields in the project spreadsheet. Finally, two of the authors coded the spreadsheet separately, debating and reconciling problematic cases as these arose, including any partly subjective judgements such as parental social class, to ensure reliability.

Individual cases are defined uniquely using their last name and forenames. Titles, gender, age and nationality were recorded, and the year he or she first joined the main board of a top 100 French company. With regard to social class, a four-way classification was adopted: upper class, upper-middle class, lower-middle class, and lower class (Halsey, 1995). Classification was undertaken mainly on the basis of parental occupation, supplemented by information on place of upbringing and family circumstances. Upper class was reserved for those with parents holding high office or having large fortunes. Upper-middle class was reserved for top professionals such

as lawyers, medical doctors, graduate engineers, senior state officials, and business men and women in senior but not the very highest positions. Lower-middle class was applied to those from white-collar occupations such as school teachers, sales people, lesser officials and technicians; while lower class was reserved for parental occupations such as worker (*ouvrier*), van driver and miner.

Place of birth was coded as falling into one of eight regions on the French mainland, with additional categories for those born in a French colony or in another country. Educational data were coded by attendance or not at an elite school and by attendance or not at one or more elite higher education institution. Many individuals attended more than one secondary school, with substantial numbers being educated locally before entering an elite institution to prepare for the examinations (in *classes préparatoires*) for entry into elite higher education (HE) institutions. Top academic qualifications by grade and subject type are recorded for each individual, in addition to professional qualifications. Declared or revealed involvement in sport and culture was recorded in each case; though under-recording is likely, given that not all individuals report their personal pursuits and pastimes.

Data on state honours were collected for the *Légion d'Honneur* (LdH) and the *Ordre National du Mérite* (ONM), each of which has the same ranking system. Membership of a *grand corps* is a signifier of membership of the French civic elite at the very highest level (Bourdieu, 1996). Known data were gathered for the Conseil d'Etat, Corps des Mines, Cour des Comptes, Inspection des Finances, and the Corps des Ponts et Chaussées, the most prestigious of these within business being arguably the Corps des Mines and the Inspection des Finances.

Individuals are classified according to their career type: those who spend most or almost all their careers in the private sector; those whose careers commenced within government departments (public administration) before entering business; and finally those who began their career in a profession (academia, law, medicine etc) before entering the corporate sector. They are also classified according to the type of activity that served as a foundation for their subsequent advancement. The number of top 100 company main board memberships and non-top 100 main board memberships held by an individual on both 1<sup>st</sup> January 1998 and 1<sup>st</sup> January 2004 are recorded, but subsidiary board memberships are disregarded on the basis that we are here concerned with discrete and separate organizations. Non-top 100 French companies are included if recognized as large companies by inclusion in *Le Guide des Etats Majors*. Non-French companies are also recorded, but only those that might be classified as large companies.

Given our interest in the FoP, the specific nature of the power base, the primary organizational field in which each director is embedded is recorded. Power bases include academia, banking and finance, the corporate sector excluding banks and finance houses, family trusts as the vehicles used by owner families to maintain control, the law, and the State. Likewise, the type and extent of engagement in external networks is noted, including involvement in charities, public bodies, business organizations, higher education, sports and culture. To gauge an individual's activities in the FoP, network size is captured by recording both the total number of corporate and extra corporate board memberships.

## **Empirical Analysis**

### ***Characteristics of the French Corporate Elite***

The French business class is often depicted as a relatively small, close-knit world (cf. Davis et al., 2003), surrounded by a relatively impermeable social boundary, and typified by high-density 'strong' or 'closure ties' which foster local cohesion and at times also promote concerted action by elites (Bauer with Bertin-Mouroto, 1987; Bauer and Bertin-Mouroto, 1997; Burt et al., 2000; Comet and Finez, 2010; Hartmann, 2000; 2007; Kadushin, 1995; Maclean, 2002; Maclean et al., 2007; Oh et al., 2004; Suleiman, 1978). This 'social closure' (Ramirez, 2001) is in contrast to the weaker ties of lower-density networks identified by Granovetter (1973), more typical of the US or UK (Maclean et al., 2006). This is a corporate world closely allied to a supportive State apparatus, which facilitates connections through the *grands corps*, such as the Inspection des Finances, the Corps des Mines or the Cour des Comptes, the pinnacle of France's civil service elite; as well as through key organs of government, especially the Treasury, or ministerial Cabinets. As many as 27 per cent of top French directors included in our sample moved from the public to the private sector, i.e. they began their career working for the State. The *grands corps* fosters an *esprit de caste*, likened to forms of extended family or freemasonry (Barsoux and Lawrence, 1990). Suleiman (1978: 197) describes the *grands corps* as 'placement bureaux', commenting that no one ever entered the Inspection des Finances to inspect finance, or the Corps des Mines to fashion a career in mining. As Bourdieu observes, the *grands corps* consecrate social identities that are both in competition and complementary, such that, despite the rivalry between individual *corps*, all *corpsards* are 'united by a genuine organic solidarity' (1996: 142).

Yet, while many members of the French business elite have at times identified more readily than in other countries with the State agenda, it would be mistaken to think of the corporate elite as monolithic and homogenous. A more accurate representation is that the elite has a number of defining characteristics, but at the same time is relatively diverse in several crucial aspects. The upper echelon of the French business system, like many others, is largely a male preserve (96% in 1998), is mainly composed of people born and bred in the country (88% in 1998), is drawn predominantly from people from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds (62% in 1998), and is highly educated (96% to first degree level, 71% to master's degree level and 10% holding a doctorate in 1998) in elite institutions (75% in 1998). This picture has changed relatively little over recent decades (Comet and Finez, 2010; Martinache, 2011). However, alongside these similarities there are also interesting differences. Members of the elite may be educated and work in Paris, but they are drawn there from all parts of France. Moreover, as French business has internationalized, significant minorities are gradually but increasingly being appointed to French boards from Belgium, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, the UK and the USA (Davoine and Ravasi, 2013; Harvey and Maclean, 2010; Wagner, 2011). Likewise, while science, engineering and mathematics (36% in 1998) and law, business, economics and management (53% in 1998) are the two main higher education platforms for business elite careers, there is considerable subject variation within those broad categories.

We suggest that as for many national business systems, there has in the French case been a tendency to simplify and over-generalize with respect to matters relating to elite selection, reproduction, networking and the exercise of power



(Barsoux and Lawrence, 1990). In what follows we suggest that the business elite is slightly more differentiated and pluralist than has been portrayed, highlighting in particular the different pathways to power taken by those who come to exercise power at the very highest level in society.

### ***Entering the Field of Power***

We identify members of the business elite operating within the FoP in France as those satisfying a minimum of two of four criteria: (i) appointment as a *top tier executive* ( $y_1$ ), the CEO or Executive Chairman of a top 100 company, including those styled Président Directeur-Général (PDG) and Président du Directoire; (ii) a *corporate networker* ( $y_2$ ), defined as holding at least two board memberships of top 100 French companies or one top 100 company and at least two other directorships of medium to large-sized companies; (iii) an *extra corporate networker* ( $y_3$ ), signified by membership of two or more national or international non-business boards or equivalent high office outside business; (iv) a *entrepreneur* ( $y_4$ ), with significant ownership rights. In effect, application of the four differentiating criteria divides the French business elite into two categories, those who become power brokers at the wider societal level within the FoP (386 individuals) and those whose careers remain confined in large measure to the corporate world (774 individuals).

This method of determining which members of the business elite are operating within the FoP acknowledges that those occupying high office in the business sphere have different power bases (including academia, banking, finance, business, a family trust, the law or the State), and recognizes that individuals who can meet more than one criterion are those most likely to function effectively at the

societal level. The four individual pathways ( $y_1, y_2, y_3, y_4$ ) were identified as embracing the most vital aspects of power, in that through their positions of top-tier director, corporate networker, extra-corporate networker and entrepreneur, they enjoy both managerial control (CEO) and ownership ( $y_1$  and  $y_4$ ), while reflecting other aspects of power which connect them with other life worlds, emphasizing the importance of networks, and suggestive of the notion of ‘power with’ and the power to convene ( $y_2$  and  $y_3$ ) (Fligstein, 1997; Lindsay, 2008; Quack, 2013).

In Table 1 we display our findings on the pathways taken by individuals acceding to the FoP in France. Part A of the table relates to entry qualifications, the four individual pathways to power that individuals might follow. It can be seen that of the 1,160 individuals profiled, just 17% of the elite qualified as *top tier executives* of a top 100 French company (pathway  $y_1$ ). However, the individuals pursuing this pathway almost certainly (with 91% probability) entered the FoP. The second pathway ( $y_2$ ), *corporate networker*, characterized by multiple directorships of top 100 and other large companies, were more numerous (32% of the elite), 84% of whom made it into the FoP. An even larger number (48% of the elite) qualified as an *extra corporate networker* ( $y_3$ ), but only 68% of them entered the FoP. The fewest number (4.5% of the elite) qualified by having significant *ownership* ( $y_4$ ) rights in large companies, of whom 90% entered the FoP.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In Part B of the table, the frequencies are exhibited in rank order for each of the nine discrete pathway combinations followed by the 386 individuals entering the FoP. This specifies more clearly the composition of the elite within the French business elite, identifying by type the hyper-agents who represent the business

community within the FoP in France. Our empirical findings have shown that the predominant type (47%), while not the most powerful, concerns senior executives below the rank of CEO in large companies who have extensive networks within the corporate and other life worlds (Maclean et al., 2010: 334-5). The most powerful agents, in the main, are the top tier executives and owner-executives who combine three or four pathways in acceding to the FoP (Maclean et al., 2010: 336-7). The most numerous (24%) are the *top tier corporate and extra corporate networkers* who lead (CEO, Executive Chairman or Chairman and CEO) large companies and who sit on the boards of other large companies and national or international organizations outside the corporate sector. These individuals are rivalled only by the 15 (4%) *top tier owner corporate and extra corporate networkers* who bestride the FoP in France. Other pathway combinations reveal interesting variations on the theme. A large minority of top tier executives, for instance, are not corporate networkers, preferring instead to channel their energies within their own companies and build networks within the field as *top tier extra corporate networkers* (15%). A further 6 business owners, as *top tier owner extra corporate networkers* (1.6%) likewise steer clear of corporate networking while building extensive extra corporate networks as engaged actors operating within the FoP.

### ***Education, Social Origins and the Field of Power***

The French business elite has at times been perceived as united by a shared education, being educated on the same benches of the same elite schools (Barsoux and Lawrence, 1990; Eymeri, 2001). Table 2 confirms that graduation from an elite higher education institution is the norm for those who progress to the top in French

business. The degree of concentration in attendances even within the set of elite *grandes écoles* and universities is noteworthy, with 52% of all attendances being at just one of ten institutions. It is common to progress from one elite higher education institution to another, and for scientists, engineers and mathematicians to progress to study economics, business, management or social sciences at postgraduate level. Those wishing to work for the State for some time and having sufficiently high grades might gain admission to the elite national college of public administration, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA). Others might work in business for a few years and then apply to a prestigious business school at home or abroad such as Harvard. Increasingly, in a change from previous decades, more are studying at business schools which were not initially considered as leading to top-tier positions, such as ESSEC Business School, established in 1907, or HEC Paris, founded in 1881 by the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The curricula these schools offer reflect the diverse knowledge needed to lead and manage successfully in global enterprises, including the study of international political economy and cross-cultural management, alongside more traditional business school subjects. The emphasis on integrated learning, engagement with practice and practitioners, problem solving and decision making increasingly has been picked up from leading US schools by elite institutions in France, including institutions with a primarily technological identity, such as the Ecole des Mines de Paris, which now offers an Executive MBA (2014).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Having an elite education of one type or another is virtually a necessary condition of reaching the pinnacle of French business, but it is by no means sufficient. Even though the numbers attending elite institutions are relatively small

when set against the total number of university and college graduates, there is nevertheless still a surfeit of individuals with the most prized qualifications from the supposedly best places. Outstanding academic performance at an elite institution of higher education, we reason, is not what differentiates between members of the corporate field elite who enter the field of power and those who do not. The 'X-factor', we propose, stems from the compelling combination of *coming from the right place* (social origin) and *personal accomplishment* (merit). Following Bourdieu (1986; 1996), we hypothesise that being born into an upper or upper-middle class family imparts the dispositions, distinctions, cultural and social capital necessary to take full advantage of opportunities that arise as careers unfold. In particular, active networking and social capital accumulation within and without corporate organizations is facilitated by the social polish, ease of manner and expectation of inclusion that stems from being born into the habitus of existing power brokers (Le Wita, 1994). Those from a well-to-do background, we suggest, come better equipped to recognize and realize opportunities than equally talented colleagues from less privileged backgrounds (Dezalay, 1995; Hartmann, 2000; Maclean et al., 2012a).

Evidence in support of our hypothesis is presented in Table 3. This suggests that social class is strongly implicated in helping to determine those who enter the FoP, as confirmed by the Chi-square test statistic. The overall probability of an agent's entering the FoP is 33.8% (see Panel A). However, those originating from classes one and two exhibit a much higher probability of entry, 51.6% and 42.2% respectively. Hence, an agent in class one, the upper class, is 3.72 times more likely to enter the FoP compared to an individual in the third social class (i.e. 51.6% divided by 13.9%). In stark contrast, agents from the third and fourth social class have only a

slim chance of entering the FoP. Panel B considers row percentages, displaying the distribution of social class both inside and outside the FoP. From this, we observe that 83.9% of members of the FoP belong to social classes one or two. Viewed in this light, the relationship between high social status and ultimate accession to the FoP emerges as especially close.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

### ***Networks and the Functioning of the Field of Power***

In Table 4 we present the results of our analysis by director type and corporate connectivity of the main board directors of France's top 100 companies in 1998. This is revealing in two main aspects. First, it demonstrates that the members of the business elite play different roles within the national business system. As many as 854 of the 1,160 member of the elite are corporate executives, divided almost equally between those who serve a single company and those who connect the company they serve as an executive with others. These corporate connectors add value to firms within their corporate network through knowledge exchange, calibration against norms, developing consensus and the initiation of collaboration or joint action in relation to common threats or opportunities (Bühlmann et al., 2012; Geletkanycz and Hambrick, 1997). The remaining three types of director within the business elite constitute small but substantial minorities. One group is made up of non-executives who serve a single company. Some of these are former executives who remain on the board after retirement; others are specialists who bring expertise from different walks of life; and others are shareholder representatives, quite often senior members of family-owned firms. A second group comprises senior public

servants who represent the interests of government on the boards of firms in which the State has retained a significant shareholding. These people are the ‘eyes and ears’ of officialdom, directly connecting the State with the business sector. The third group is composed of non-executives who serve more than one company. Typically these are individuals who prolong their careers following retirement from executive responsibility and who are prized as advisors, communicators and influencers, often within the political realm.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

The second main point emerging from Table 4 is that the degree of connectivity varies considerably between members of the business elite. A majority of State representatives sits on just a single board, although a sizeable minority have more extensive networks, connecting between two and four boards. Just one of them is in the super corporate connector class of five or more boards. This class is made up of just over 9% of the business elite drawn mainly from the ranks of executive and non-executive networker directors. Of the 105 super corporate connectors identified, almost three-quarters of these are executive networkers, the ultra-powerful individuals who dominate the French corporate system and who qualify as hyper-agents, typically the chief executives of the largest companies who are invited to join the boards of other pillars of the French business establishment (Comet and Finez, 2010; Denord et al., 2011; Dudouet and Joly, 2010; François, 2010).

Further insights concerning the connectivity of the French business elite emerge from the analysis presented in Table 5. In this, the French business elite is divided into six categories by primary current association: French corporate board

(77.4%), international (non-French) corporate board (9.9%), banking and finance (5.2%), law and other professions (0.7%), politics and public administration (5.6%), and academia (1.2%). Table 5 makes clear the interpenetration between State and business elites, confirming that a high proportion of those whose power base is now within the business sector were once employed by the State. However, the extent to which French companies have welcomed foreign nationals on to their boards as they have extended their international reach is less well known (Davoine and Ravasi, 2013; Wagner, 2011). Likewise, growth at home and abroad, often through mergers and acquisitions, has required the close support of the investment banks, leading to their partners and senior employees being appointed to numerous corporate boards. The appointment to boards of a small number of individuals from the law, academia (scientists and economists) and other professions is interesting, reflecting an appreciation of the specialist talents of top people within those fields.

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

It can be observed that individuals with different power bases (to wit academia, banking, finance, business, a family trust, the law or the State), bring with them their own network of connections from within and outside the corporate world, broadening the potential sphere of access and influence available to Top 100 companies. At any one time, a director will likely have a portfolio of appointments to boards, advisory groups, government commissions, representative bodies and the like. The value of such connectors lies in knowing from the inside what is going on in high places, and how to access influencers and decision makers (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006; 2008). Charities, public bodies, business associations, educational institutions, sporting clubs and cultural organizations are all places where



participation in governance makes for connection within the FoP. The mingling of elites in diverse settings helps to attune minds and form a consensus as a basis for action by power elite coalitions, as depicted in Figure 1. Table 5 confirms just how well connected are those with a power base in international business and banking and finance (Kadushin, 1995; Kerr and Robinson, 2012); demonstrating further the reach of the business elite into the public sphere, and its connectivity in the governance of business associations. The connectivity of the business elite with higher education, most often with schools attended, serves to reinforce the hegemony and ideological unity imparted by the most highly prized French educational establishments (Comet and Finez, 2010; Dudouet and Joly, 2010; Eymeri, 2001).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study of elites is arguably downplayed in the social sciences literature, especially relative to its critical importance to the workings of society and to ‘world-making’ by elite agents (Bourdieu, 1987; Clegg et al., 2006; Maclean et al., 2012b; Savage and Williams, 2008). Given that the cogency of organizational research lies first and foremost in its data (Courpasson et al., 2008: 1387), a quintessential aspect of a reinvigorated examination of power and elites is the need to ‘obtain the evidence... and to think of each [social] phenomenon as paradoxical or counter-intuitive’ (Courpasson and Golsorkhi, 2009: 62). This we have endeavoured to do.

There is arguably a common perception that the French corporate elite is relatively undifferentiated, comprising a self-reproducing oligarchy who act and think alike (Barsoux and Lawrence, 1990; Bauer with Bertin-Mouroto, 1987; Bauer and

Bertin-Mouroto, 1997; Eymeri, 2001; Milesi, 1990; Suleiman, 1978). This is arguably how the French corporate elite has traditionally appeared to the outside world (Burt et al., 2000; Kadushin, 1995). Our study demonstrates that, despite forming a relatively small world, ‘particularly closed in on itself’, the French corporate elite is in fact slightly more nuanced and differentiated than it is at times assumed to be (Comet and Finez, 2010: 9-10; Davis et al., 2003; Useem and Karabel, 1986).

Although our empirical study ended just before the onset of the financial crisis in 2007, nevertheless we can speculate that one effect of the crisis on the corporate elite may be to spur it to become more differentiated, in particular to admit more international directors into its fold (Wagner, 2011). In the continuing grip of a global crisis (at the time of writing, France is not yet out of recession), it makes sense for the boards of top French companies to spread their risks and capture a broader perspective by becoming more internationalized (Davoine and Ravasi, 2013; Harvey and Maclean, 2010). Of the 1,160 dominant corporate agents profiled, 386, approximately one third, were found to have acceded to the FoP as ‘dominant dominants’. We find this group of hyper-agents to be differentiated by power – in terms of whether they accede to the FoP or not; whether they achieve top-tier or next-best positions; and whether they extend their reach into different life worlds or remain confined to the business sphere. They are also differentiated by actor type and career trajectory. In other words, a reasonably large and diverse cast of actors is found to represent business within the FoP in France.

Three interesting observations emerging from this study require emphasis and point to the necessity for further research. The first is that the four pathways to power identified are interlinked, illustrative in part of the ‘contemporary fluidity of

elites' highlighted by Zald and Lounsbury (2010: 971). This might be a reflection of structural changes in the French economy, given the increasing proportion of financial and professional services amongst the largest French companies (Ramirez, 2010). Our inclination, however, is to interpret this as suggesting that the FoP requires diversity, albeit perhaps a rather limited form of diversity within the parameters of 'very strong social endogamy' (Denord et al., 2011: 37); and that there may in fact be different ways of linking the French business system with the body politic. The implication is that the FoP is more of a 'mixed bag' than it may initially appear. There are other dominant agents in the system with interesting and varied roles to play in society. This corresponds with the need for dominant agents to 'convene power' by forming provisional issue-based coalitions of interests in the FoP with players from different backgrounds and power bases, in the manner of 'power with' outlined above (Lindsay, 2008; O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008; Quack, 2013). Viewed on this light, contemporary coalitions of interests are not fixed or 'hard-wired' but rather emerge in response to issues which arise, despite residual loyalties based on shared schools and *grands corps*. Hence we might see them as more flexible than might at first appear, more akin to 'wi-fi', as depicted in Figure 1, being able to reconfigure, reform and regroup as the need arises in pursuit of diverse personal, political and organizational interests and agendas on a case-by-case basis (Clegg et al., 2006; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). This depiction of the FoP, we acknowledge, goes beyond our empirical findings, being informed by our interpretation of our data. To this end, while the organizational field has attracted some interest from scholars in terms of its capacity to lead to the FoP (Denord et al., 2011; Maclean et al., 2014), there is a need for future research to be conducted into

elites recruited in particular from other sub-fields, who pursue alternative pathways to the top, and who serve as members of these coalitions of power, including those identified in Figure 1.

Our second observation concerns causality regarding who does and who does not succeed in penetrating the FoP in France. A basic requirement clearly is the need to be well schooled in the French system, and Table 2 reveals some positive relations in this regard. When a high-status background is lacking, an elite educational grounding is all the more precious to the individual concerned (Reay et al., 2009). Nevertheless, attendance at a *grande école* does not emerge as the ultimate discriminator it is often assumed to be, for the simple reason that many people attend *grandes écoles*. What matters more, we suggest, is the alliance of social origin and educational attainment, the union of class and meritocracy. Transparently, corporate agents from less well-to-do backgrounds must run harder and faster to acquire the dispositions, skills and know-how to ascend the corporate ladder and break out to accede to the FoP, as Table 3 confirms (Maclean et al., 2012a). In a meritocracy, the game may be open to all comers, theoretically at least. However, how games are constructed in the first place forms an important part of the equation (Fligstein, 1997); and the game is stacked in the favour of the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful (Dezalay, 1995; Hartmann, 2000).

Our final observation relates to the importance of corporate and extra-corporate networking to the composition and functioning of the FoP. Corporate agents acceding to the FoP, the majority serving executives, exhibit considerable diversity of type and connectivity. They are confirmed as multi-positional agents, whose reach extends into different life worlds by dint of their external ties

(Geletkanycz and Hambrick , 1997; O’Mahony and Bechky, 2006), enabling them more readily to form the issue-based coalitions and pressure groups that have the capacity to frame action, direct agendas, shape public opinion, influence resource flows, and even, on occasion, to (re)set the rules of the game at the societal level (Fligstein, 1997; Lindsay, 2008). Corporate and extra-corporate networking activities are complementary, and those who accumulate the highest levels of social and symbolic capital within this milieu invariably wield the most power and influence. In this regard, we propose that the most successful agents in building and exploiting networks, insinuating themselves in positions of power and influence, are those emerging from the upper and upper-middle classes. Once established as hyper-agents within the FoP, they are able more readily to prolong their careers, picking up significant appointments on a serial basis. The implication is that incumbents are not easily ousted from the system; the FoP exhibiting a considerable degree of ‘stickiness’ in this regard.

This paper contributes to the relatively sparse literature on business elites entering and operating within the FoP, generally and specifically. We concentrate in this regard on the organizational field, that is to say on accession to the FoP achieved through membership of the business elite, rather than via other possible routes highlighted in Figure 1, such as the legal or medical field. We break new ground theoretically through our conceptualization of the FoP which articulates and develops the concept and terminology first propounded by Bourdieu (1993; 1996; 2011); exploring the meaning and implications of the construct, and integrating it into a wider conception of the formation and functioning of elites at the highest level in society more generally. Methodologically, we connect biographical data of top

French directors with the FoP in France in a novel way. Using a detailed dataset, our study takes a closer look at the composition of the FoP in France, comparing and contrasting those who enter the FoP with those who fail to qualify for membership. In this way, our analysis connects micro and macro levels of analysis, linking the careers of individual agents with the bigger picture of the functioning of elite groups within society (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). In focusing on the business sphere, as opposed to other potential pathways to the FoP featured in Figure 1, it is understandable that the group under study might ostensibly exhibit social closure (Eymeri, 2001; Ramirez, 2001). However, we found in the course of this study that the French corporate elite is actually slightly more nuanced and differentiated than traditional perceptions might imply, suggestive of the multidimensional nature of power in the French corporate world. We suggest that this is a trajectory which is likely to continue, given the financial crisis, as the net of expertise is by necessity cast more widely to meet global challenges in the future.

Given the close relationship between high social status and the probability of entering the FoP, as highlighted in Table 3, we further suggest that organization theorists should look afresh at issues of social class. The language of class has been quietened in recent decades, overridden by notions of a 'classless', individualized society and a seemingly ever-enlarging middle class; and by the politics of identity, gender and ethnicity which have arguably taken centre stage (Bennett et al., 2009; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Scott, 2002). As a result, the broader ramifications of inequality viewed as hierarchy have tended to be overlooked (Bottero, 2004). Class processes, however, increasingly operate through 'individualized distinction' (Savage, 2000: 102). Widening inequalities, exacerbated by the current crisis

(Godechot, 2011), throw down the gauntlet to society to produce and nurture a more inclusive leadership; in this sense too, elites are 'on trial. It therefore seems to us that the continuing effects of class differentiation on processes of hierarchy merit re-examination (Bottero, 2004; Maclean et al., 2014; Reay et al., 2009).

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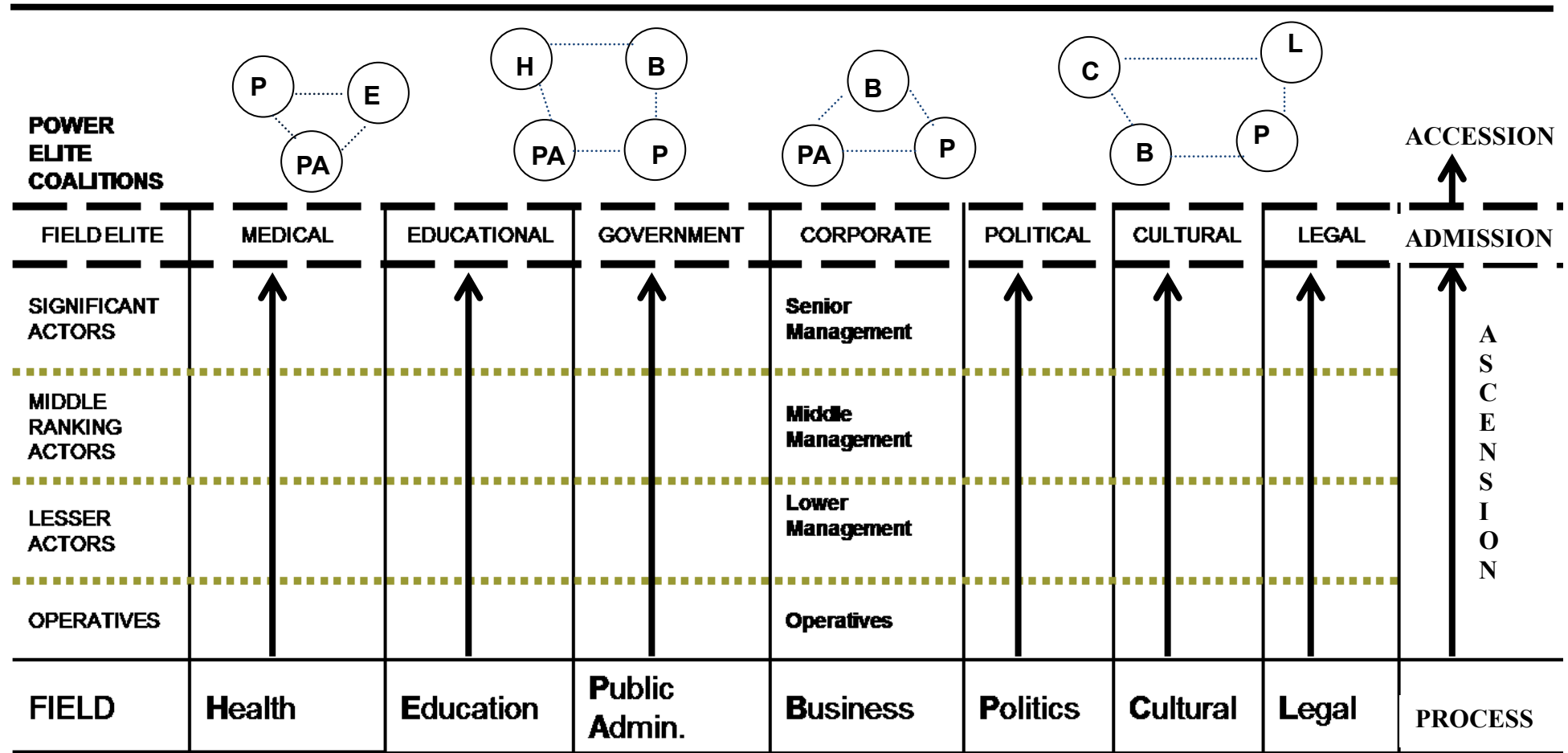
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Figure 1: Elite Actors in the Field of Power



**Table 1: Entry of Corporate Agents into the Field of Power in France**

***A: Entry Qualifications (observations = 1,160)***

<b>Pathway</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>No. Qualifying</b>	<b>% Qualifying</b>	<b>No. within FoP</b>	<b>% qualifying within FoP</b>
Top Tier Executive	y1	198	17.1	180	90.9
Corporate Networker	y2	366	31.6	309	84.4
Extra Corporate Networker	y3	555	47.8	379	68.3
Ownership	y4	52	4.5	47	90.4

***B: Entrants into the Field of Power (386 of 1,160)***

<b>Type of Actor in FoP</b>	<b>Pathway Combination</b>	<b>No. of Entrants into FoP</b>	<b>% of Entrants into FoP</b>
Corporate and Extra Corporate Networker	y2 + y3	182	47.2
Top Tier Corporate and Extra Corporate Networker	y1 + y2 + y3	94	24.4
Top Tier Extra Corporate Networker	y1 + y3	58	15.0
Top Tier Owner Corporate and Extra Corporate Networker	y1 + y2 + y3 + y4	15	3.9
Owner Corporate and Extra Corporate Networker	y2 + y3 + y4	12	3.1
Owner Extra Corporate Networker	y3 + y4	12	3.1
Top Tier Owner Extra Corporate Networker	y1 + y3 + y4	6	1.6
Top Tier Corporate Networker	y1 + y2	5	1.3
Top Tier Owner Corporate Networker	y1 + y2 + y4	1	0.3
Top Tier Owner	y1 + y4	1	0.3

**Table 2: Higher Education and the French Business Elite\***

<b>Institution Name</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>	<b>No. of Attendances</b>	<b>% of all Attendances</b>
École Polytechnique	Engineering, Sciences and Mathematics	1794	222	11.8
Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris (IEP) (Sciences Po)	Social Sciences	1872	174	9.3
École National d'Administration (ENA)	Public Administration	1945	144	7.7
HEC Paris	Business and Management	1881	96	5.1
Université Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne	Law, Humanities and Social Sciences	1252	93	4.9
École des Mines de Paris (ENSMP)	Engineering, Sciences, Economics and Management	1783	73	3.9
Université Paris 2 – Panthéon-Assas	Law, Management, Social and Information Sciences	1252	64	3.4
Harvard Business School	Business and Management	1908	39	2.1
ESSEC Business School	Business and Management	1907	38	2.0
École Centrale Paris	Engineering, Science and Technology	1829	35	1.9

*Note:* \*Data are available for 1,064 individuals with a combined attendance of 1,880, and a mean attendance rate of 1.77 attendances per head. The top ten institutions account for 52.1% of all attendances.

*Source:* French business elites database. This contains data on the 1,160 directors (executives and non-executives) of the Top 100 companies in France in 1998.

**Table 3: Social Class and the Field of Power in France**

Panel A: column percentage					
Social class					
	1	2	3	4	Total
Not in FoP	105 (48.4)	267 (57.8)	298 (86.1)	46 (80.7)	716 (66.2)
In FoP	112 (51.6)	195 (42.2)	48 (13.9)	11 (19.3)	366 (33.8)
Total	217 (100)	462 (100)	346 (100)	57 (100)	1,082
Panel B: row percentage					
Social class					
	1	2	3	4	Total
Not in FoP	105 (14.7)	267 (37.3)	298 (41.6)	46 (6.4)	716 (100)
In FoP	112 (30.6)	195 (53.3)	48 (13.1)	11 (3.0)	366 (100)
Total	217 (20.1)	462 (42.7)	346 (32.0)	57 (5.3)	1,082 (100)
Chi-square test					
Statistic	112.09				
p-value	0.000				

*Source:* French business elites database. This contains data on the 1,160 directors (executives and non-executives) of the Top 100 Companies in France in 1998. Of these we know the social class of 1,082 individuals.

**Table 4: Corporate Connectors in France (n = 1,160)**

<b>Director Type</b>	<b>Single Board</b>	<b>Connecting 2-4 Boards*</b>	<b>Connecting <math>\geq</math> 5 Boards*</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Executive Networker</i>				
Number	0	344	77	421
Row %	0.0	81.7	18.3	
<i>Dedicated Executive</i>				
Number	433	0	0	433
Row %	100.0	0.0	0.0	
<i>Non-Executive Networker</i>				
Number	0	81	27	108
Row %	0.0	75.0	25.0	
<i>State Representative</i>				
Number	36	28	1	65
Row %	55.4	43.1	1.5	
<i>Dedicated Non-Executive</i>				
Number	133	0	0	133
Row %	100.0	0.0	0.0	
<i>All Directors</i>				
Number	602	453	105	1160
Row %	51.9	39.1	9.1	

*Note:* Includes both Top 100 and Non Top 100 (medium or large) French and Non French companies.

*Source:* French business elites database. This contains data on the 1,160 directors (executives and non-executives) of the Top 100 Companies in France in 1998.

**Table 5: Connectivity by Non-Executive Appointments of the French Business Elite\* (n = 1,160)**

Appointment by Organization Type	Power Base*					
	CB (n = 898)	ICB (n = 115)	B&F (n = 60)	L&P (n = 8)	STATE (n = 65)	ACAD (n = 14)
<i>Top 100 Co.</i>						
Number**	98	10	21	0	18	3
% in class	10.9	8.7	35.0	0.0	27.7	21.4
<i>Non Top 100 Co.</i>						
Number**	305	107	60	3	17	1
% in class	34.0	93.0	100.0	37.5	26.2	7.1
<i>Charity</i>						
Number***	64	35	10	1	5	2
% in class	7.1	30.4	16.7	12.5	7.7	14.3
<i>Public Body</i>						
Number***	204	61	40	6	65	11
% in class	22.7	53.0	66.7	75.0	100.0	78.6
<i>Business Assoc.</i>						
Number***	253	77	48	5	19	6
% in class	28.2	67.0	80.0	62.5	29.2	42.9
<i>Education</i>						
Number***	96	44	19	2	24	11
% in class	10.7	38.3	31.7	25.0	36.9	78.6
<i>Culture/Sport</i>						
Number***	64	35	10	1	5	2
% in class	7.1	30.4	16.7	12.5	7.7	14.3

*Notes:* \* Power base is defined by current primary association. CB = French corporate board; ICB = international (non-French) corporate board; B&F = investment bank or the investment banking arm of a large bank; L&P = law or other profession; STATE = politics or public administration; ACAD = academic world.

\*\*Total number of appointments held. \*\*\*Number of individuals holding such an appointment.

*Source:* French business elites database. This contains data on the 1,160 directors (executives and non-executives) of the Top 100 Companies in France in 1998.